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AUTHOR	Denton, David R.
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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the research on summer school and demonstrates that summer school makes a difference in students' lives if it is done right. A survey of more than 1,000 schools in the southern United States found that one-third of the responding schools did not offer summer school, many programs being the victims of budget cuts. Of those schools that ran summer programs, few used carefully planned, high-quality instruction. In states with strict promotion requirements, summer school is the last hope for failing students to avoid repeating a grade. Even if strict promotion standards are not a factor, the lowest performing students need summer school to keep from falling further behind. The report claims that if states are serious about ending social promotion and reducing retention rates, they should make summer school an integral part of a year-round program, ensuring that it is available to all failing students at no cost to parents. Such programs should meet clear standards for quality, length, and scheduling of classes and should respond to individual needs through the use of innovative and creative teaching strategies. Furthermore, summer school should place a priority on student mastery of reading and math skills, skills that are taught by teachers who have special training and/or proved ability to help struggling students. (RJM)

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Summer School:

Unfulfilled Promise

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Southern
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592 10th St. N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30318
(404) 875-9211
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States that are serious about ending social promotion and reducing retention rates should ensure that summer school ...

- is an integral part of a year-round program of extra time and extra help;
- is available to all failing students at no cost to parents;
- meets clear standards for quality, program length and scheduling of classes;
- responds to individual needs through the use of innovative and creative teaching strategies;
- puts priority on student mastery of reading and math skills;
- employs teachers who have special training and/or proven ability to help struggling students; and
- rigorously evaluates teaching strategies and student achievement.

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In most SREB states,
summer school is a local option

States have provided few standards,
regulations or funds for summer programs.

Research has shown that high-quality
summer school does help struggling students
improve their performance.

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Summer School:

Unfulfilled Promise

Summer school is critical to state efforts to end social promotion and reduce retention rates.

Unfortunately, summer school has not received the attention it deserves in most states and remains largely an afterthought. Some schools or school systems offer it; some don't. Some do it well; some don't. Nobody really knows much about what happens in summer school because most states collect little or no information about it and few provide meaningful guidance on how summer programs should operate.

The desire to eliminate social promotion has led a steadily growing number of states to establish firm standards for grade promotion and high school graduation. Too often, however, eliminating social promotion only has meant increasing the number of students who must repeat grades. The 2001 SREB report ***Finding Alternatives to Failure: Can States End Social Promotion and Reduce Retention Rates?*** concluded that "in most cases, both social promotion and retention are easy but wrong answers to the problem of how to help struggling students." The only right answer is to identify students who are at risk of failure early and provide them with timely, effective, individualized help and extra time to work on problem areas.

In their efforts to help all students succeed, states rightly have made it a priority to identify students at risk of failure early and to provide them with help during the school year — before they fall too far behind. If school-year programs are done well, many struggling students will perform at passing levels by the time school ends in the spring. Even with high-quality programs during the school year, however, some of the lowest-performing students probably will not meet grade-level standards by the end of the school year. Summer school can be these students' last chance to avoid retention, which often results in continued failure.

Summer school cannot rescue failing students if it is not available. When it is available, it must be done right, and students must take advantage of it. (See table on page 6.) This report explores what states need to do to ensure that high-quality summer school is available to all students who need it.

This report was prepared by David R. Denton, SREB director of school readiness, reading and health affairs.

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Summer-school policies in SREB states

The SREB states, like most of the nation, historically have treated summer school as an add-on program — distinct from the "real" work of the schools that takes place during the "regular" school year. States typically have provided few or inadequate standards, regulations or funds for summer programs.

As state accountability programs increasingly focus on ending social promotion and providing extra time and special help for struggling students, ensuring both the availability and the quality of summer programs becomes even more important. Although up-to-date statistics are not available, media coverage of summer-school issues suggests that the numbers of summer programs and of students attending them have increased in recent years. In September 2000, an *Education Week* article titled "Bumper Summer School Crop Yields Mixed Test Results" stated: "If a general trend stood out, it was the continuing growth of [summer-school] programs, especially in big cities. As long as schools continue to crack down on social promotion … it seems that classrooms will be as crowded as swimming pools in the summer."

Despite summer schools' potential in reducing social promotion and retention, policies on summer programs remain far from comprehensive in most SREB states. Only **Louisiana** requires all school districts to offer summer school to failing students "as an extension of the instructional schedule for the school district." The requirement applies only to fourth- and eighth-graders and is aimed at students who fail the state's LEAP exam. As of spring 2000, passage of the LEAP exam is required for promotion to the fifth and ninth grades. LEAP summer-school programs must be free for students; must have no more than 15 students per faculty member; and must offer at least 70 hours of instruction per subject in fourth grade and 70 hours per new half-credit or 47 hours per repeated half-credit in eighth grade. Funding is based on the number of failing students per district. There are no specific guidelines for program content. However, Department of Education staff visit and evaluate each program.

Also in spring 2000, **Delaware** began requiring every student who fails the mandatory state test at the end of grade three, five or eight to attend summer school and retake and pass the test in order to be promoted to the next grade. By default, school districts are required to offer summer school for failing students. Districts receive very little guidance regarding the structure or schedule of summer school, however. The state's Extra Time initiative for at-risk students provides funding for summer school.

Summer school is optional for local school districts in the other 14 SREB states. **Virginia** describes summer school as one option that school districts may include as they develop their required plans for helping struggling students. Since spring 1999, every student who does not pass all required assessments by the end of grade three, five or eight must attend a summer-school program or must participate in an unspecified "alternative support program" during the summer. If parents choose a private program, or if

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no public program is offered, they must pay all the costs. Public summer-school programs receive enrollment-based funding from the state. Regulations that take effect in summer 2002 require all public summer-school programs to provide at least 20 total hours of instruction per subject. In kindergarten through fifth grade, summer schools must provide at least 40 total instructional hours. The maximum student-to-teacher ratio allowed is 18-to-1, and transportation to and from the program must be provided for students. The state offers little guidance regarding program content, but the Department of Education must approve each district's overall student-support plan. Each district also must collect and report data on program results.

Since 1998, **Maryland** has provided schools with funding for programs to help at-risk students. In 2002 the legislature funded a pilot program to provide summer school for students in kindergarten through 12th grade in two school districts. Each district will develop plans for its summer program; the state Board of Education will review and approve these plans.

In 1988, **West Virginia** established the WV Reads program to provide summer school for students with reading problems. WV Reads annually provides competitive grants of $10,000 each to 30 schools for these reading-focused summer schools. A parallel program, WV Math, provides the same funding to 30 schools for summer schools for students struggling with mathematics. The law gives preference to low-performing schools. These summer programs must operate at least four days a week for four consecutive weeks. Programs also are required to:

- use strategies based on research;
- have measurable goals and benchmarks;
- include evaluation plans;
- establish community partnerships; and
- identify other resources to be used in addition to state funds.

Schools are encouraged to design their programs based on what their communities need. Any changes to the programs during the summer must be approved by Department of Education staff, who also visit summer schools and report on how they are doing. There are no regulations for summer-school programs that are not funded by WV Math or WV Reads.

Until 1999, **Arkansas** had the SREB region's most detailed guidelines for summer schools through its Summer Supplemental Instructional Program for students at risk of retention. Regulations for these summer programs specified the days and hours of operation, student-to-teacher ratio (a low 12-to-1), additional training requirements for program faculty and administrators, instructional strategies, and requirements for follow-up support for students during the next school year. The legislation that included this program was rescinded in 1999. Under the testing and accountability legislation

Summer School's Effect on Student Retention in North Carolina, 1997-1998 to 1999-2000

	Students failing at the end of the school year	Students promoted in the fall	Percent of students promoted in the fall
Attended summer school	76,319	57,681	76
Did not attend summer school	165,196	0	0

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Note: North Carolina does not provide special funding or any regulatory guidance for summer school, but the state collects data on who attends and on how summer school affects at-risk students' chances of promotion to the next grade.

that replaced it, schools receive funds for interventions for students who are performing below grade level. These funds may be used for summer schools, but the program emphasizes interventions during the school year.

Six other SREB states — **Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina** and **Texas** — have programs to provide schools with funds to help at-risk students, and these funds may be used for summer schools. There generally are few guidelines — beyond those that apply to special-help efforts during the school year — for schools that offer summer schools. All of these states require summer-school teachers and administrators to meet the same certification requirements that apply during the school year.

No state funding is earmarked specifically for summer school or for programs to help struggling students in **Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma** and **Tennessee.** Local school districts that want to provide summer schools must find other ways to pay for them. One state official said that alternative funding usually comes from charging students tuition for summer school.

All SREB states except Delaware receive grants through the federal Reading Excellence Act. The state programs use this money to provide local school districts with competitive grants to improve reading instruction. Most of these state programs require the school districts that receive funding to offer summer programs for students who have reading deficiencies. The state programs' guidelines for these summer programs are relatively comprehensive. However, summer school is not a requirement for states to receive the federal grants.

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What do we know about summer school?

Because summer school traditionally has been a local option for school districts, the quality and duration of summer schools have been inconsistent in most states. Very little information is available about summer-school offerings or student performance. In an attempt to get some idea of the situation, SREB sent a survey about summer-school activities to almost 1,200 high schools and middle schools participating in the SREB-sponsored school-reform initiatives ***High Schools That Work,*** **Making Schools Work** and **Making Middle Grades Work.** Participating schools have demonstrated a desire to find ways to improve student performance and so would seem more likely than other schools to recognize the importance of summer school.

A total of 551 high schools, junior high schools and middle schools responded to the survey. About 20 percent (109) of these schools were not in SREB states. (The school-reform initiatives serve other states in addition to the 16 SREB states.) A little more than two-thirds (68 percent) of the respondents said they offered summer schools either at their schools or through their school systems. (There were no significant differences between the schools in the SREB region and those in other states.) The other third did not make any effort to provide struggling students with access to summer schools.

Program characteristics

There are dramatic variations in summer schools' hours per day, days per week and total weeks of operation. One high school summer-school program identified in SREB's survey operated seven hours a day, five days a week, for nine weeks — a total of 315 hours. The shortest program consisted of three five-hour days. Though both reported addressing the same subjects, these programs obviously are not comparable. Most programs fell into a range between these extremes. The average program operated about 100 hours in various configurations. Some held classes for only a few weeks, but with long days. Others met only in the morning for several weeks. Research on the "summer slide" (see page 8) suggests that summer-school programs produce more lasting benefits when they operate over a greater number of weeks for fewer hours per day. This schedule reduces the gaps between the regular school year and the summer program at both ends and provides more continuity of learning experiences.

There also were distinct differences in the subject matter covered by summer programs. Some programs work almost exclusively to build essential skills in reading/language arts and math. Others focus on particular courses or subjects. Four percent of summer-school programs described in the SREB survey exist only to help students pass a particular test and are offered only for students in grades that are tested. Such test-focused summer schools do not represent the majority of programs even in states that require students to pass certain tests for promotion to the next grade or for graduation.

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There also are wide variations in the grades after which summer schools are offered. Some schools offer summer schools only after selected grades; others offer summer schools after every grade. Virtually all of the responding schools offer summer schools in eighth and/or ninth grade, reflecting a widespread concern that too many students are unprepared for high school work when they begin ninth grade. Several high schools offer summer schools for incoming ninth-graders.

The "Summer Slide"

A quality summer-school program can help struggling students improve their performance significantly and, in many cases, avoid failure. However, the implications of not offering summer school for struggling students go beyond the prospect of immediate failure. It has become increasingly apparent that a long summer vacation does not represent just a pause in student learning but actually causes many students to forget what they have learned.

In 1996 researchers analyzed 39 studies of summer vacation's effect on achievement test scores. They concluded that, on average, students lose at least one month of learning during the summer. Students lose ground in both reading and math, but the loss typically is greater in math. There is some indication that students from middle-income families may gain in certain areas of reading achievement during summer vacation, while lower-income students lose ground. The researchers hypothesized that this difference was because middle-income students were more likely to have ample opportunities to practice reading during the summer. Because a disproportionate number of struggling students are from low-income families, this finding about reading achievement means that summer vacation actually widens the gap between successful and unsuccessful students.

Unless they can use summer to narrow the gap, struggling students will start the next year even farther behind their peers than they were at the end of the previous year. Without the opportunity to make progress in summer school, their chances of ever catching up will get slimmer and slimmer.

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What makes an effective summer-school program?

Relatively little quality research existed on summer school prior to the 1980s, probably because summer school historically has been considered secondary to the "real" work during the regular school year. In the last two decades, however, the research base has grown considerably. **The most important conclusion from this research is that summer school does help struggling students improve their performance.** Success is not automatic. The research consistently identifies five factors that make a summer program effective:

- high-quality teachers;
- adequate, reliable funding;
- an emphasis on reading and math;
- a climate of innovation and creativity; and
- a comprehensive plan for research and evaluation of program results.

High-quality teachers

Quality teachers for summer school seems like an obvious requirement if the goal is to help students who have not succeeded during the school year. All students need good teachers. The lowest-performing students need the best teachers, because these students demand more of teachers' skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, the selection of summer-school teachers usually is unrelated to their abilities. Most schools that responded to the SREB survey reported trouble filling all teaching slots because so few teachers wanted to teach summer school. These schools had no opportunity to be selective.

Funding may be part of the reason for teachers' reluctance to teach summer school. Many summer-school programs do not pay teachers at levels comparable to what they earn during the school year. The financial incentives may not attract an adequate pool of candidates.

The availability of high-quality teachers for summer school also is limited by the irregularity with which summer programs are offered. In many places, summer school is offered only if funding falls into place and if there is enough interest among students and parents and/or enough pressure from higher authorities to get more students to meet minimum standards. When summer school cannot be counted on to be offered every year, it is difficult to develop a reliable pool of teachers with proven success in teaching summer school.

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A Tale of Two Systems

Chicago Summer Bridge

The summer-school program operated by the **Chicago Public Schools** may have been scrutinized more than any other program in the country. In 1996-1997, the school system began requiring students to pass the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills at the end of the third, sixth and eighth grades to be promoted to the next grade. Those who had not passed the tests by the end of the regular school year were required to attend the Summer Bridge program, then retake and pass the test to avoid repeating a year. The Chicago experience provides insight into the benefits and challenges of providing a standardized summer-school program for struggling students in a large urban district.

Since the Summer Bridge program began in the summer of 1997, an average of more than 23,000 students a year have been required to attend. Third- and sixth-graders attend three hours per day, five days per week, for six weeks; eighth-graders attend four hours per day, five days per week, for seven weeks. Teachers are regular Chicago Public Schools teachers, who are paid the same rate as during the school year. All Summer Bridge classes use a standard curriculum, which is aligned closely with the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills for the three grade levels. (The curriculum during the school year is not aligned with the tests because the district does not require all schools to use a standard curriculum.) While teachers have very little flexibility in *what* they teach, they have extensive freedom in *how* to teach it. Predictably, evidence suggests that some teachers are better than others at getting the curriculum across.

An average of 40 percent to 50 percent of students have achieved passing scores on the ITBS at the end of the summer program. Passing rates at the end of summer school have been the highest in eighth grade, followed by sixth grade and then third grade. Borderline students are more likely to pass than are those who are farther behind, but almost all students — even those who do not pass the tests — show significant gains.

A less quantitative — but perhaps more important — indicator of Summer Bridge's success is the fact that students say they like it a lot better than the regular school year, largely because they get a lot more individual attention. While an *Education Week* article in 2000 cited attendance as a serious problem for summer schools, the attendance rate for Summer Bridge averages more than 90 percent. This high attendance rate probably can be attributed partly to the good things that students and parents hear from those who have attended the program. The district also has had a good public-information effort. Teachers also feel generally positive about the program, though some say the highly structured curriculum sometimes limits their ability to respond to diverse needs.

One of the most important lessons of Summer Bridge is that, in most cases, one year of summer school cannot solve all of a student's problems. Though students narrow the achievement gap between themselves and more successful students who do not attend summer school, they rarely close the gap completely. Those who successfully pass the tests at the end of summer school usually continue to be at risk of failing and needing summer school in future grades. The lowest-performing students, even if they are retained, usually continue to be the lowest-performing and the most likely to be back in summer school again.

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Johnston County Summer Academy

The 2001 SREB report ***Finding Alternatives to Failure*** highlighted **Johnston County, North Carolina**, as an example of a school district with a strict student-accountability program and a comprehensive, effective system for helping struggling students. Summer school is an integral part of that system, and Johnston County's program is an example of how to do summer school right. Johnston County requires all third- through eighth-graders to achieve minimum scores on the North Carolina End-of-Grade Tests in order to be promoted to the next grade. High school students must pass end-of-course tests in 10 subjects in order to graduate. (Before the state tests were introduced, students were required to pass tests developed by the school district.)

At the beginning of each school year, students who may need help meeting test standards are identified based partly on scores on the previous year's tests and on new assessments administered at the beginning of the school year. These students receive individualized help during the school year to improve their chances of succeeding on the tests. In the spring, students in grades three and higher take the end-of-grade or end-of-course tests. With certain exceptions, those who fail these tests before the end of the school year must either attend the summer academy or receive other summer tutoring and then must retake the tests in order to have a chance of being promoted.

Johnston County teachers developed the summer-academy curriculum, which is adjusted each year to reflect changes in standards and curriculum during the school year. At the end of the regular school year, teachers of students who have failed the required tests tell summer-academy officials which strategies they have used during the year. The summer program then provides each student with a curriculum and teaching strategies that are different from those that did not work during the year.

Summer-school teachers must be recommended by their principals. All teachers planning to teach summer school are required to go through a six- to 10-hour training program developed by the district. In addition, teachers must complete a commercial training program that focuses on different learning styles. Summer-school teachers are paid at the same level as during the regular school year.

The summer academy is offered throughout the summer in two-week sessions of five hours per day, five days per week. Breaking the program into distinct sessions allows flexibility in the length of time that individual students are required to attend. The last session ends about two weeks before the school year begins. The maximum class size is 15.

An average of about 250 students in kindergarten through 12th grade attend the Johnston County summer academy each year. On average, between 40 percent and 50 percent of the students pass the required tests when they retake them after summer school. Few students who attend the summer program once and achieve passing scores need to repeat summer school in later years. Teachers shape students' experiences in subsequent school years based partly on what works during summer school.

It is interesting that the percentage of students who pass the tests after summer school is the same in Johnston County, a small, largely rural district, as in Chicago, where the program serves 100 times as many students each summer. As in Chicago, almost all students who attend Johnston County's summer program improve their performance, even if they don't pass the tests.

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One of the most effective ways to ensure an adequate supply of qualified teachers for summer school is to involve them in the planning process from the beginning. In Johnston County, North Carolina (see page 11), for example, all teachers help plan individual students' summer-school programs. Those who want to teach in summer school go through special training programs that help them build a sense of camaraderie and shared mission.

When the College Station, Texas, school district decided it needed to strengthen its summer-school program, it identified teachers with strong interest in summer school and gave them release time during the school year to plan the summer program. The planning group included teachers designated as summer-school principals so that regular-year administrators would not have the additional responsibility of summer school. The planning group worked with other faculty, administrators, students and parents to design a highly successful summer-school program.

Attleboro (Massachusetts) High School, a *High Schools That Work* site, designed its successful summer-school program based on the system of interdisciplinary teaching teams that is used during the school year. Teachers were trained in how to meet students' individual needs, and an ongoing process for planning the summer program was established.

None of these three summer-school programs has difficulty finding highly qualified teachers. Unfortunately, such comprehensive approaches to summer school are extremely rare.

Adequate, reliable funding

Adequate funding is essential to make summer school meaningful. The previous section addressed the importance of offering competitive salaries for teachers. Funding also is necessary to ensure low student-to-teacher ratios so that students get substantial individual attention. Teachers must be trained in using the latest technology and need access to many various materials, including computers and software. To do the job right, per-student funding for summer school should be at least at the same level as per-student funding for the regular school year.

A more basic concern is the reliability of funding. Summer school should be treated as a fundamental part of the school's responsibilities and should be funded as a regular part of the school year. Special-help programs for struggling students should operate seamlessly, with efforts during the school year leading directly and smoothly to the more concentrated summer-school format.

The current slowdown in the national economy clearly shows the vulnerability of summer school when it is not funded as a regular part of the school year. Several schools that responded to the SREB survey said that they usually offer summer programs but that they will not offer such programs this year because of funding cuts.

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Newspapers have reported recently that many large school districts across the country that previously had celebrated summer school as the answer to ending social promotion are gutting — or even eliminating — their programs. For example, Washington, D.C., has cut its program in half. South Carolina is one of many states that have cut summer-school programs as a result of economic slowdown. An Associated Press article in the *Charlotte Observer* on April 26, 2002, summed up the situation in South Carolina. The following is a paraphrase of that article:

> State budget cuts have forced school districts across South Carolina to reduce drastically or eliminate summer programs. Administrators say they don't have enough money left in their budgets to pay for teachers' salaries, transportation and materials needed for summer schools. Asked to comment on the situation, a leading South Carolina educator said it's frustrating to deal with budget cuts while legislators call for more academic accountability. "You undercut what you say you want," she said. "We want quality, but we don't want to pay for it. The system itself is failing the children."

This situation is especially troubling in states that, like South Carolina, link grade promotion directly to grades and/or test results. If summer school gives students a last chance to avoid retention in some years but not in others, fairness becomes a serious ethical — if not legal — issue. If there is a commitment to eliminating social promotion and reducing dropout rates, the strong evidence of summer school's effectiveness and of the detrimental effects of the summer slide (see page 8) clearly suggests that public policy should guarantee all students who are failing at the end of the school year an opportunity to attend a quality summer-school program.

Emerging evidence from Chicago (see page 10) and other urban programs reinforces the importance of making summer school available every year for students in every grade, at least in larger, more diverse districts. These programs are finding that one year of summer school — no matter how well-done — is not enough to turn the lowest-performing students into successful ones. It appears likely that some of these students may need to attend summer school almost every year if they are to have a chance of completing high school.

Emphasis on reading and math

Reading, writing and math are essential to success in school and in modern life. Elementary schools rightly focus on teaching these basic skills, and middle schools and high schools increasingly are adopting the same focus. Summer school should be no different. Most SREB states have initiatives specifically to help improve teachers' abilities to teach all children to read, and the federal government has committed major funding to this goal. Similar efforts are being developed for math. Abundant research shows that the vast majority of struggling students have serious reading problems. There also is evidence that the summer slide seriously affects reading and math skills.

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While summer school should focus on reading and math, they should not be the only things taught. Reading and math show up in virtually every area of study during the school year, and the same should be true of summer school. Other subject areas such as social studies, science and vocational arts provide a plethora of opportunities to continue teaching reading and math in more subtle ways while showing students repeatedly why it is necessary to be able to read and write fluently and solve different types of math problems.

Summer school also has great potential to serve as professional development for teachers, especially in teaching reading and math. Because students' struggles almost always stem from reading and math problems, teachers must be able to teach these skills to all types of students. Teachers can benefit from experience in dealing effectively with reading and math in the intense and individually oriented setting of summer school, and their improved skills also will bring results during the regular school year. Better instruction during the school year could mean that fewer borderline students will fail in the spring and have to attend summer school. Summer-school faculty then will be able to give even more attention to the students who need them most.

A climate of innovation and creativity

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of innovation and creativity in meeting the needs of struggling students. Summer school involves intensive reteaching of material that students did not master during the school year, but those students need help that goes beyond simply reteaching the same material in the same way. Research shows that successful summer programs are characterized not only by reduced class sizes, lots of individual attention and clearly stated learning objectives but also by innovation and flexibility in finding ways to help students succeed.

The high attendance levels in the Chicago Summer Bridge program and the fact that students actually enjoy the program prove what a difference flexible teaching methods and a lot of individual attention can make. There is strong evidence that the more creative and innovative teachers are in the Chicago program, the better students' results are. The summer-school program in Johnston County, North Carolina, is another example of what summer school can accomplish when it is built around discovering and meeting students' individual needs.

What is the "something different" that summer schools need to do? Doing "something different" often means connecting the subject matter to real-life situations that are relevant to students. It might mean finding books about baseball to read and using baseball statistics in math instruction for a student who lives and breathes the sport. It could involve using musical themes to engage a student who constantly drums on his desk or incorporating a lot of physical movement to reach the aspiring dancer. It might mean using technology that presents material in a game-like format. It might mean simply giving a student the opportunity to discuss the material with teachers and peers to an extent not possible in the regular classroom.

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As the public school population in the SREB states grows more diverse culturally and linguistically, identifying every child's needs and finding ways to meet them become increasingly important but also more difficult. Summer school offers extra time to understand and meet students' needs. This opportunity should not be wasted.

Variations on Summer School

Efforts to end social promotion have focused increased attention on summer-school programs to help struggling students avoid failing grades, required courses or exit exams. However, there are other types of summer programs.

One type of summer program aims to improve the performance of students who are not failing but are passing at borderline levels. These programs usually focus on basic skills in reading and math to reduce the risk that the students may slip below the passing line.

Many summer-school programs offer special opportunities for high-performing students. These programs can serve several purposes:

- **Acceleration programs** allow students to take required courses during the summer in order to meet graduation requirements earlier.
- **Elective programs** allow students to take courses in areas of interest, such as the arts or foreign languages, that are not offered during the regular school year or that do not fit into a crowded curriculum of required courses.
- **State honors programs** give gifted students intensive experiences in selected areas — such as technology, mathematics or the performing arts. These programs usually are held on college or university campuses. Examples include the Georgia Governor's Honors Program, Maryland Summer Centers and the Virginia Summer Residential Governor's Schools.

All of these summer-school programs serve important purposes. A well-designed summer-school policy should accommodate programs that meet a variety of student needs.

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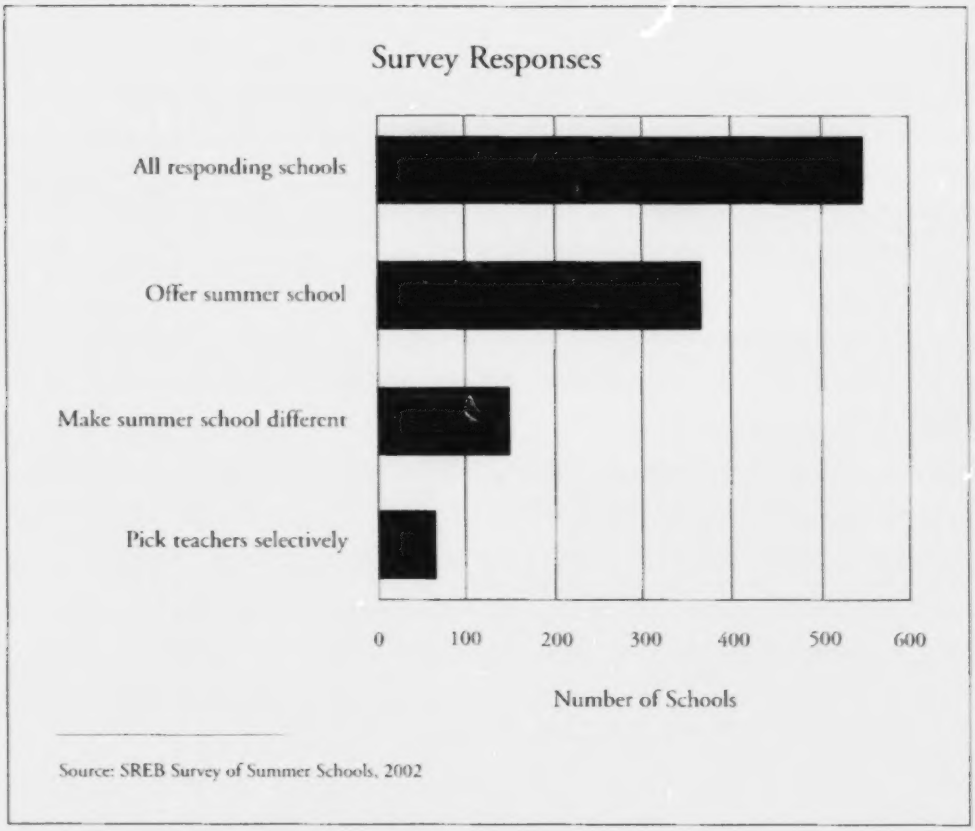

Source: SREB Survey of Summer Schools, 2002

A comprehensive plan for research and evaluation

Successful programs are not static. They constantly incorporate new knowledge from outside research into their policies and practices. They carefully evaluate their activities and the results to identify what does and does not work and to get ideas about new things to try.

For a research-and-evaluation process to be most effective, it should be part of the original program design. If it is incorporated from the beginning, information will be collected and analyzed systematically as the program starts up and evolves. Evaluation efforts imposed later are more expensive and less reliable than those that are part of the program design. A well-designed process for research and evaluation adds to initial program costs. However, by identifying ineffective practices, it can prevent a far greater waste of funds in the long run.

Research and evaluation are part of the program plans of most state-funded prekindergarten programs. As a result, states are gaining an ever-clearer picture of what works to prepare at-risk children for success in school. Summer school badly needs the same kind of systematic evaluation, but this goal cannot be achieved until summer school is planned and organized as comprehensively as prekindergarten programs are.

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Year-round School

The most dramatic variation on the summer-school idea is year-round school, which essentially eliminates decisions about how to structure summer sessions. Year-round calendars work in various ways. A year-round school typically holds regular sessions throughout the year, with each session followed by a two- to three-week break. In some cases, there is a one-week makeup session after each regular session for students who need extra time and/or special help. In other year-round schools, successful students are required to attend only three of the four sessions. Struggling students attend all sessions to give them enough time to make up work or to get extra help. Other students can use the extra session to take elective courses, to accelerate their progress or to take time off.

Whatever model is used and however the year is subdivided, the most important difference between year-round school and traditional summer school is that the sessions for struggling students are an integral part of the year-round school calendar. As such, year-round school eliminates problems such as poor attendance and the lack of participation by some students who need additional help.

None of the 467 high schools and 84 middle schools that responded to the SREB survey operates on a truly year-round calendar, but more than 3,000 schools across the country do. The year-round school model may be a promising option for policy-makers who are seeking ways to narrow achievement gaps between successful and failing students.

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Recommendations for State Policies

1. Any state that is serious about ending social promotion and reducing retention rates should **ensure that effective summer programs are available to all failing students.**

2. Summer school should not be something that is added on at the end of the school year to help struggling students. **Summer school should be a required part of a year-round program of extra time and special help for struggling students.** Information on students' performance in summer school should be used in planning continued support for them during the next school year. These students should be monitored continually throughout their school careers so that new or recurring problems can be detected and dealt with as early as possible.

3. To ensure consistency in availability and quality, **summer school for struggling students should be funded as an integral part of the academic program.** Families should not be required to pay for children to participate in this type of summer program.

4. **States should provide clear, reasonable standards** for the length of summer programs and scheduling of classes but should allow enough flexibility for innovation, creativity and responsiveness to community needs.

5. All summer programs for struggling students should focus on **responding to individual students' particular needs through the use of instructional materials and strategies that are different from those that have failed during the school year.** Especially in the elementary and middle grades, summer schools should emphasize students' mastery of basic skills in reading, writing and math.

6. Every effort, including financial incentives, should be made to **recruit summer-school teachers who have demonstrated that they can be successful with struggling students.**

7. **All summer-school programs should include rigorous evaluation of teaching strategies and student achievement** in order to ensure that the programs meet student needs and to identify which practices work for different children.

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Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research provided information in personal communications that was very helpful in compiling this report. A full report on the Chicago Summer Bridge program is expected to be released by the consortium in summer 2002.

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